

"HUMOR, A GOOD PUZZLE, ENGAGING CHARACTERS."

—CATHY PICKENS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR, FOR DEADLY DECLARATIONS



DEADLY GOLD RUSH

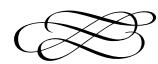
AN INDIE RETIREMENT MYSTERY



LANDIS WADE

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PART I



DAY ONE - THE GOLDEN YEARS

CHAPTER 1



DEATH IN THE PASSAGE

The narrow alleyway walls muffled the gunshot as uptown Charlotte slept. It was one thirty in the morning on Tuesday, April 1.

The phone call didn't last long.

"It's me," the caller said. "I need your help."

"I'm listening."

"I have a body."

"Whose?"

"Chance Landry."

"Where are you?"

"Lincoln Street. Inside the Rivafinoli Passage in South End. Next to the Queen Charlotte mural."

"Anyone with you?"

The caller explained who else was still there.

"You leave. Tell them to stay with the body and wait for my call. I need to think."

Three minutes later, the call was made to the only living person remaining in the passage who could help.

"I am going to text you an address." Next, they explained what to do with Landry's body when they got to the address.

"Are you kidding? He's already dead."

But the person giving instructions had no sense of humor. "Just do it."

A text message followed with the address.

The person who received the message knew how to follow directions and did as they were told.

CHAPTER 2



VENGEANCE IS SWEET

The 11:15 p.m. email on Craig Travail's phone read: *Your friends are about to suffer financial ruin, untold heartbreak, and trials and tribulations. You have only yourself to blame.*

What?

Travail read the email again, slower this time. He read it twice more. There was no author name. Just an unknown *vengeanceissweet* email address.

Travail exhaled. His email checking practice was a bad habit, a routine held over from his career when clients expected their lawyers to be available 24/7.

Nothing good ever came of his itch to scratch his email in-box for late-night messages, like now, when it would be twice as difficult to sleep after watching the late-night local news—with its smorgasbord of crimes, collisions, and natural disasters—and reading this email.

One news story was about elder fraud, a reminder of how susceptible retirees are to financial fraud schemes. Was that what was coming for his friends at the Independence Retirement Community, which everyone called the Indie? Were the residents about to suffer financial ruin because of risky investments? If so, he'd be angry at the perpetrators for their heartless guile and frustrated with his friends for being so gullible.

The television show made the point, though, and he agreed, that adults spend most of their lives collecting assets to make retirement possible and the rest of their days worried if their accumulated treasure will last as long as they do, leading some retirees to make risky and uninformed choices with their nest eggs. Was that what his

friends had done? Made bad choices with their money? Is that what the emailer taunted him about?

Travail's instinct was to fire off a harsh response to the email with some choice lawyer-like words and warnings, but he ignored the bait—he suspected they wouldn't respond anyway—and he punched the remote control instead.

The television screen faded to black, and his den fell silent, save for Blue's rhythmic snores and his jerking legs. Travail's black and tan coonhound must be dreaming, chasing ducks along the lake behind Travail's cottage, as he was apt to do in real life, and as usual, failing to catch the waterfowl before they darted back into the water. Travail leaned over his club chair's arm and let his free hand graze on Blue's back until his pet stopped running in his sleep.

Maybe the email was a prank. Maybe, like him, a friend had become bored with life at the Indie. And yet, the email bothered him.

Whose lives—which friends' lives—were about to be shattered? And how? And for that matter, why? And what did he have to do with it?

Since moving a year earlier into the Independence Retirement Community, Travail had made two best friends, Harriet Keaton and Yeager Alexander, and several other good friends. He'd met many other retirees, some whose company he tolerated and some whose company he could do without. Either way, he didn't want to see anyone hurt. He certainly didn't want his close friends to suffer, and he didn't want to be the person responsible for their pain.

The flame on the candle he'd lit this morning was down to the base of the wick. He turned away from it, detesting the severe loneliness of March 31.

There was no logic for feeling so alone—what with all the crimes, court cases, and historic mysteries Harriet, Yeager, and he navigated since he arrived at the Indie and the time they spent together—but it was hard to control his feelings, especially the feeling of being by himself. A Jewish resident told him about the tradition of lighting a candle on the anniversary of a loved one's death. It felt loving to strike the match in Rachael's honor, but as day became night, Travail's mood shifted. It had been three years to the day.

The flickering light had a strobe-like effect on the things that reminded him of Rachael: her furniture, her quilts, her artwork, her pictures. Travail missed Rachael's kindness, her playfulness, her cre-

ativity, and the rituals they shared. The flicker made the past too present, making him long for another night and morning and day together. She was here, there, and everywhere, but nowhere at all.

Assertive is what he'd needed to be in the moment that changed everything. He and Rachael were in the mountains at a high-elevation rental for a getaway when a freak storm rolled in and dumped six inches of snow on the ground. Rachael decided to drive to the local general store to stock the pantry for their cozy weekend together. He had a work call and offered to go with her after he finished.

"It's just snow," she'd said.

"Okay, but be careful," he'd responded.

"Always, dear." Then she kissed him on the mouth, patted his bottom, and walked out of his life forever.

The news came in a phone call from the local police. First came the shock, then the grief, and then the Monday-morning quarterbacking. He should have insisted Rachael let him drive her. He should have done more to protect her. If he had, maybe she would still be here. Maybe the out-of-control delivery truck that hit the black ice would have killed him instead of her, or maybe Travail could have prevented the accident.

Spring in North Carolina was supposed to be about new beginnings, not endings, with the dogwoods and azaleas in bloom, but his eyes grew wet from the memories, and he felt a sudden heaviness in his body.

He looked at the email again and became resolute. For sure, he would not make the same mistake twice with the people he cared about. He would protect them.

But who was behind the email?

Whoever wanted sweet vengeance against his friends wanted vengeance against him too, because their pain would be his pain. The question for his lawyer brain—used to solving riddles for years—was: who despised them and him that much?

Like an unexpected electric shock, the answer startled him. This email was exactly the kind of plot his nemesis, Robert Elkin, would conjure. If Elkin hurt Harriet, Yeager, and his other close friends, he would hurt Travail worse.

But wasn't Elkin no longer a threat? They'd exposed his concealment of the truth about the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, avoided death at the hands of his father, pushed him

out of his Big Law leadership position, and seen to it that the state bar took his law license. Elkin no longer had big-time lawyer power. The only thing he had was anger, resentment, and a low-paying job as a paralegal with a former client, though Travail didn't know the client's name or their business. It was a sharp drop from the level of influence that had made the man dangerous, and yet, there was reason to be cautious. Elkin was cunning and would hold a grudge till death do they part.

Travail leaned his head back in his chair, looked up at the ceiling, and pondered the text again: *financial ruin, untold heartbreak, and trials and tribulations*.

Harriet was too smart to get caught up in a financial scam. Not so with Yeager. He was impulsive, likely to jump at the chance to possess something shiny because it might become shinier.

Travail pulled an olive-colored sweatshirt over his t-shirt, woke Blue, and took him into the backyard to do his business under the stars. While he waited, Travail glanced across Lost Cove Lake to Harriet's cottage. He inhaled the fresh night air, and he marveled at the main building's reflection on the lake's surface. Harriet's lights were out. She, an early riser, must be asleep.

Seeing Harriet's peaceful cottage raised a question he'd been pondering. Should he ask her on a date? Carrie Roberts, the Indie Gossip Queen, thought so and often shared her opinion.

Most days, it seemed like the right decision not to ask Harriet—or anyone else, for that matter—on a date. Three years wasn't that long, really, since Rachael died. And yet, here he was, caught in a web he'd spun for himself, trapped somewhere between what he no longer had and the companionship he wanted but resisted. Harriet was his friend. Should he keep it that way?

Harriet would most likely turn him down anyway. He was a project, and he knew it, starting with the lesson she'd had to teach him last year that retirement living is not life's dead end but a fresh path forward. And now, with him being a sixty-six-year-old widow afraid to address his feelings, she'd be quick to beg off.

Blue finished up, and the two headed inside. His watch told him it was a new day. He blew out the dwindling flame on the candle and headed to his bedroom, where Blue was already curled up on the end of Travail's queen-size bed. Wearing only striped boxers and a white cotton t-shirt, Travail pulled the covers up to his chin. With a

good night's sleep, he'd be fresh in the morning to put his effort into stopping Elkin. He still had his law license, after all, and as Yeager would tell him from time to time, "You ain't dead yet."

He closed his eyes and imagined tying a dry fly rig with two nymphs on a dropper line, the key to catching river trout on and below the surface at the same time. This falling-asleep system was better than counting backward from three hundred by threes. It worked its charm in less than five minutes.

Travail didn't know when he dozed off that the murder train had left the station. He didn't know when he began to snore that someone had already set the trap for his friends. And he didn't know when he fell into a deep sleep that when the sun came up, he would ponder, and not for the first time, how he could have been so wrong to believe retirement living would ever be boring or lonely.

CHAPTER 3



STRANGE PLACE FOR A BODY

“Get up, Craig Travail.”

Get up from what?

And why was Chuck Yeager Alexander standing alongside a Tennessee leg of the Watauga River yelling at him to get up?

Yeager stepped off the riverbank and walked across the smooth surface in Travail’s direction. The man normally swam to retrieve trout. But walking on water? Unbelievable.

Again, with the booming voice. “Wake up, Craig Travail. Harriet needs our help.”

Strong hands clasped Travail’s shoulders and yanked him from a river with the prettiest trout he’d ever seen to a dark room where a gigantic figure hovered over him. Blue growled.

Travail let his feet fall to the floor and put one hand on Blue’s head to calm his pet. The illuminated bedside clock said it was 3:15 in the morning, Tuesday, April 1.

Was this an April Fool’s joke?

But then, that voice again. “Thought I’d never get you to wake up, Craig Travail.”

Yeager tossed Travail the khaki pants he’d left on the chair beside his bed.

Travail was sure he’d locked the doors. With dead bolts, in fact. “How’d you get in?”

Yeager waved his hand at Travail as if getting into Travail’s cottage was the easiest thing he’d ever done. “Put your pants on. We need to get to Harriet’s house. There’s trouble with her brother.”

What brother? And what trouble?

Yeager left the room before Travail could quiz him, but even in his sleepy state, the word *heartbreak* came to mind.

Travail tripped as he tried to put one leg into his pants. With both legs in, he went to the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and rubbed deodorant under his arms.

Dressed in khaki pants and the olive-colored sweatshirt he wore the night before, Travail found Yeager in the kitchen wearing blue jeans and a light flannel shirt, unbuttoned and loose to reveal a white t-shirt that said in black letters, "I act before I think."

Yeager handed Travail a thermal cup of steaming black coffee and tugged at his sleeve. The sound of a motor running and Yeager's impatience were Travail's clues that if he was going to learn what trouble Harriet had with her brother, he'd better move.

But when Yeager's truck approached Harriet's cottage, Yeager didn't slow down.

"I thought you said we were going to Harriet's house."

"We are. The one uptown."

First, Harriet had a brother he didn't know about. Next, she had an uptown house. He'd wait for the trifecta.

"Bet you didn't know Harriet's brother just got out of prison."

Bingo.

A deer crossed the road, and Yeager swerved to avoid a collision, causing hot coffee to spill in Travail's lap. The liquid soaked through his pants and left him wet and irritable.

After they passed through the Indie's front gates and onto the main road, Travail looked at Yeager. "Tell me about the trouble."

Yeager leaned forward as he ran a red light and kept his eyes on the road. "Joey is her twin, but he's nothing like Harriet."

That was not an answer to Travail's question, but it got him thinking about a person who was nothing like Harriet Keaton. He must be irresponsible, uneducated, unattractive, unorganized, shy, and unwilling to be helpful or encouraging to others. And he was 99-percent sure Harriet had never been to prison. There was that difference too.

But a twin brother? She'd never said a word about him. He wanted to know why, but he shouldn't press the matter. Yeager might give him the lecture about how he needed to pay more attention to the world around him, because "if you did, you'd know what the heck was going on in your friends' lives, Craig Travail."

It was true. He wasn't intuitive about personal matters.

Yeager read his mind. "Harriet's got secrets too."

"Apparently not from you." Travail's tone was sharper than he intended.

Maybe he reacted the way he did because Yeager woke him up before what Yeager called the "butt crack of dawn." Or maybe it was because Harriet confided in Yeager before him, even though that would make sense since she and Yeager had been friends for twenty years, and he'd been at the Indie for only one year. Still, Harriet and he had become close friends—was that the right way to describe their relationship?—after they'd almost lost their lives on Yeager's quest to solve the mystery of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. If Harriet had a brother, why hadn't she told him?

"It's a long story. Best to let Harriet fill you in."

Travail wasn't awake enough to argue. "At least tell me why we're in such a hurry."

"Did you know the tobacco chewing judge you and Harriet faced in court last year moved into the Indie?"

Travail turned his head to Yeager. "Roscoe Brady?"

"They call him 'Chaw,' but yes, that's the one. Been here about a week. He's our judge in the new Indie People's Court."

"The new what?"

Yeager hit a pothole and bounced Travail off the bench seat.

"Read your bulletin. Holding court in the chapel was my idea. Hard to lie staring God in the face."

"Excuse me?"

"We've got a fun case at four thirty today, one hour before dinner. Court draws a good crowd because it doubles as happy hour. You should drop by. My role is—"

Travail cut Yeager off. "What does this have to do with Harriet and her brother?"

Yeager crossed a double yellow line to pass a garbage truck, throwing Travail against the passenger-side door. When Yeager swerved back toward his lane, Travail fell toward Yeager and Yeager pushed him back in his place. "By the way, how do you think the women-folk will like Chaw's habit? He can hold his spit for at least thirty minutes."

Travail wasn't thinking about anyone's habit other than Yeager's of not getting to the point, when Charlotte's uptown skyline came

into view.

They crossed Independence Boulevard and zipped past Central Piedmont Community College, where a reminder of their previous investigation appeared. A statue of a colonial man in a tricorn hat leaning forward on a horse was in a race as fast as theirs, only his race took place 250 years earlier when he delivered the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence five hundred miles to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. The statue evoked a memory of how troublemaker Robert Elkin's entanglement with a secret Virginia society almost got Travail and his good friends killed last year.

Yeager acknowledged Captain James Jack's statue with a "Huzzah!" as he ran another red light and then turned right on Morehead Street. He continued to exceed the speed limit and veer off topic. "We solved the mystery about the mink coats."

Travail didn't care. The gossipy Indie residents had been abuzz about the thefts, but he didn't think a missing mink coat in the South was that big a crisis.

"It was Lena Rand, poor thing. She's in memory care now. When they cleaned out her unit, they found fifteen mink coats in her closet. She'd been wearing them home from dinner. Thought they were hers. Sometimes, the answer to a mystery is not that complicated."

Travail didn't respond. His focus was on Harriet as he sipped the remainder of his coffee Yeager's reckless ride hadn't spilled. Perhaps this morning's mystery would be as uncomplicated as the mink coat caper. He hoped so, for Harriet's sake.

Yeager made a sharp turn and entered the district in South End where successful gold mines prospered in the early nineteenth century, though there was nothing to remind the public of that history but a few historic signs. There were no houses in sight. Yet.

"Almost there, Craig Travail. Harriet's house backs up to the Gold District, near where the Rudisill Mine used to operate."

Travail knew nothing about the Rudisill Mine, other than the name, but it was good to know they were getting close. Curiosity and his concern for Harriet made the perilous drive feel slow. And it was the middle of the night.

They swerved through several streets and crested a hill—Yeager said it used to be called Rudisill Hill—where, off to the right, South End stood up to be noticed.

There were several office towers under construction, with mixed-use developments spread out before them. Uptown businesses—law firms included—hurried to make the move to the shimmery new business and entertainment district under continuous construction. Perhaps this was why someone on the historic planning commission said the city logo should be the picture of a bulldozer.

A few quick turns later, Yeager stopped his truck behind two police cars and a firetruck parked in front of a one-story house, narrow across the front, with cream siding. The yard had Harriet's gardener's touch, with staggered flower beds, waiting on the spring bloom, a contrast to the junkyard next door guarded by a chain-link fence.

Yeager killed the engine as his Jitterbug phone—the one with the retiree-sized buttons, as he liked to remind Travail and Harriet—rang. He answered, listened, and didn't say much, a rarity in the one year Travail had known Yeager.

"Righto. I will let you know what I find," he said, before he closed the flip phone and turned to Travail. "The police arrested Harriet's brother, but he's still in the house. Time to hurry, Craig Travail. His name is Joey Penman."

They stepped out of Yeager's truck, and to Travail's surprise, Yeager whispered, "See you soon." He then slipped around the house's corner closest to the junkyard, unnoticed by the crowd of people on Harriet's property. Where was he going?

Two firefighters carrying axes approached, and Travail stepped aside to let them pass. Why the axes? And why had the police arrested Harriet's brother?

A person dressed in white coveralls—perhaps a forensic examiner—sat on the porch steps removing crime scene protective gloves. As if someone had died.

Harriet sat on the porch swing near a uniformed police officer taking instruction from a man in a dark brown suit. By the man's clothes and demeanor, he looked like he might be a detective.

Travail and Harriet locked eyes. She quick-stepped it down the porch steps, and met him on her sidewalk halfway between the street and the house. She wore sage-green knit pants and a matching long-sleeved top. Her outfit, complete with tennis shoes, looked comfortable, unlike her facial expression. Not prone to fluster under pressure, this morning was the exception. Her voice caught. "Thank you for—"

Travail felt on edge as he opened his arms and gave Harriet a hug, feeling the tension in her body. "How can I help?"

With her red curls wilder than usual, she turned her head from side to side as if to see whether anyone could hear them. "Just act like a lawyer. My brother Joey is in big trouble."

Before Travail could ask Harriet any questions about her brother's trouble, the man in the brown suit—a suit that upon closer inspection had seen better days—stood before them holding an unlit cigar, reminding Travail of a '70s television detective.

"I'm Detective Sizemore. I assume you're the lawyer Ms. Keaton said was coming. We've got quite a situation here."

What was the situation? The detective didn't elaborate, and Harriet couldn't say with the detective hovering. "I'm Craig Travail here to represent Ms. Keaton's brother. May I see him?"

"Absolutely. He's inside. Don't worry. He hasn't said a word."

Travail looked at Harriet as they walked toward the house. She was stoic, offering no clues as to what he was about to encounter.

The uniformed police officer on the porch moved aside for them to enter the house. Harriet led the way as they stepped into a small living area.

A man sat on a couch with his arms behind his back, presumably in handcuffs, with another uniformed police officer looking over him. The man's beard showed he hadn't shaved in a few days, and his short red hair mixed with gray was unbrushed. He wore torn blue jeans and a maroon sweatshirt. He kept his eyes lowered. Harriet didn't look at him, and he didn't look at her.

Travail broke the awkward silence. "You must be Joey Penman. I'm Craig Travail, a lawyer. Your lawyer, if you'd like me to be. I am Harriet's friend."

Joey didn't look up and didn't respond.

The screen door opened and shut behind them. The detective spoke to Joey. "Time to go."

Travail blinked. "You said I could talk with my client."

Detective Sizemore laughed. "No. I said you could see him."

"Where are you taking him? And why?"

The detective examined his phone. "It says here that William Joseph Penman, who I gather from your conversation goes by Joey, violated his post-release supervision obligations when he missed his recent meeting with his parole officer. We're taking him in to keep

him comfortable for his video conference hearing today at 4 p.m. Nice we ran into him. What's the word? Fortuitous? Now he can attend his hearing."

Harriet whispered to Travail. "Can he do that?"

Travail wasn't sure. His limited experience in criminal law didn't extend to post-release supervision and its violation process. He could research it, but that wouldn't help them now. He affected an official tone. "My client has a constitutional right to speak with his lawyer."

The detective shrugged. "We have to process him first. You can speak to him at the jail. Let's say three o'clock. You can have a chat before his hearing."

The detective nodded at the police officer, who pulled Harriet's brother from the sofa and pushed him out the front door, allowing the detective to focus his full attention on Harriet. "Do you mind telling me why your brother was in your house and a dead man is in your basement?"

Travail felt that heightened sense of nervousness he got when his clients spoke in court, worried about how they would fare, but at least in those situations, they had time to prepare. A dead body in Harriet's basement was something he suspected Harriet was unprepared to address.

Travail whispered in Harriet's ear. "Don't say a word." With a corpse in her basement, Harriet could be a suspect too.

She ignored him.

"After my brother went to prison—a fact you seem to know, Detective—my father died, leaving this house to me. I haven't talked with Joey in years, and I didn't know he was going to drop by for a visit. I also don't know how the parole officer lost contact with him." Harriet said it like it was the parole officer's fault and finished with, "I have no clue who is under my house, but I have a question for you."

The detective waited.

"How do you explain my collapsed kitchen floor?"

Surprised, Travail looked through a door to the kitchen to see the destruction. So focused on Joey, he hadn't noticed the mess when he came in the house. And now, he was as interested as Harriet in the detective's answer to her question. Why had the kitchen floor collapsed?

But the detective ignored the question. "The business card we found in the dead man's wallet says he was a real estate developer named Chance Landry."

Harriet flinched, and the detective picked up on it. "I see you recognize the name. Didn't he testify against your brother in the trial that sent him to prison?"

Harriet regained her composure and fired back. "You think my brother killed his accuser in a twenty-year-old trial, placed him under my house, and after the floor collapsed on the corpse, he waited for the fire department to arrive, knowing they would find the evidence and call you?"

"The floor collapse made significant noise. Neighbors heard it and called 911." The detective rubbed his chin. "Maybe he stayed to protect you. To take the fall."

At that, Harriet did something unexpected, even for her. She held out her wrists. "I can't take it anymore. I confess. After I deposited my Social Security check yesterday, I killed Landry, placed his body under my house, and danced to my success on my kitchen floor until it collapsed on him. I tricked my twin brother into coming here, knowing he would take the blame as an ex-convict."

Detective Sizemore shrugged before he called to the woman in the white suit to "bring the knife." She handed him a baggie he held up for Harriet to see. "Do you recognize this?"

She opened her mouth but didn't speak, causing Travail to step forward and shield her. "Was the man under the house killed with that knife?"

The detective grinned. "He took a bullet between the eyes, but seeing as how this knife was stuck in his back when we found him, I'd say the knife helped."

"Where's the gun?" Travail was all business now, angling to shift attention from Harriet.

"Good question, Counselor." The detective shifted his gaze to Harriet. "The knife came from your kitchen set. Care to tell us where we can find the gun?"

Harriet pushed the detective aside and walked toward the door. Travail took out his business card—the one Yeager insisted he have for his solo, almost non-existent law practice—and gave it to the detective. The card did not say, "100-percent money-back guarantee" or "we win all our cases," as Yeager had suggested—"because you're so

good at law stuff, Craig Travail”—but it had his mobile phone number and email address. If the detective arrested Joey or Harriet for Chance Landry’s murder, he wanted to be the first person the detective called.

“One more thing, Ms. Keaton.”

Harriet stopped and turned as the detective held up a bowling-ball-sized clear plastic bag that looked like it contained coins.

“Any idea why these nineteenth-century gold coins were scattered in your basement and on the victim? Do you and your brother collect coins?”

Harriet didn’t answer. She tugged Travail’s arm, and he followed her out of the house.

The screen door slammed behind them, and they walked in silence to the street.

Travail couldn’t help but think about the email he’d received hours earlier. Was this the untold heartbreak for Harriet, the fact her twin brother—or she, or both of them—might face trial for murder? He could sense tension in Harriet’s stiff posture.

“Your kitchen knife?”

“I didn’t kill Landry, Craig.”

“I didn’t think—”

The detective’s voice rang out. “As they say on television, Ms. Keaton, don’t leave town.”

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